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World Chronicle

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President, 51st Session
United Nations General Assembly

JOURNALISTS: Anne Penketh, AFP
Bhaskar Menon, *International Documents Review*

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SPECIAL SESSION ON THE ENVIRONMENT

From 23 to 27 June 1997, Governments will meet in New York for a special session of the United Nations General Assembly. Seventy heads of State are expected to attend. The aim is to review and appraise commitments made at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The current President of the UN General Assembly, Ambassador Razali Ismail of Malaysia, discusses the politics of the meeting and the current state of debate about sustainable development and environmental issues. He also expresses his views on proposals to enlarge the UN Security Council.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

A generation ago, environment stories hardly ever made the news, and concepts like "sustainable development" were unknown except to a few specialists. Today, 25 years after the ground-breaking Stockholm Environment Conference, followed by the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, everybody is conscious of green issues. Later this month, a special session of the United Nations General Assembly will be held in New York. It's expected that some 70 heads of State will attend. The aim is to assess progress made in implementing proposals agreed by Governments in Rio five years ago.

Our guest today is the current President of the United Nations General Assembly. He is Razali Ismail, the Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations. Ambassador Razali, who holds this office at a time of mounting interest in far-reaching reforms of the United Nations system, will be questioned here at UN headquarters in New York by Anne Penketh of AFP and Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review*.

Ambassador Razali, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

RAZALI: It's great to be here.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. President, looking at some of the background material for the special — not special session, but — well, it is a special session, yes, of the General Assembly, which is coming up, it's pretty depressing. It looks as if not very much has happened positively since 1992 at the Earth Summit, and in fact the document says that there's been a considerable deterioration in the environment. So what have Governments been doing in the last five years? I mean, they make all these grand commitments, and you have declarations and so on and so forth, and probably some more will come out of this new special session, but it's all hot air, isn't it?

RAZALI: This is precisely why we should have the special session. We should really accept that we have done so little. This is why we have to meet. I think five years down the road it is good that we are able to take stock and flail ourselves for our incompetence and our inability to marshall political forces to do the necessary things as Governments, as societies, and as representatives of the planet.

LITTLEJOHNS: But why have Governments been so lax in not following through?

RAZALI: It's a whole multiplicity of sins that has been committed in the last five years. It's not just Governments; Governments and new actors, new actors like the private sector are also involved here. And even the NGOs have, in my estimation, have not really worked hard enough. The NGOs have let Government off the hook.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean organizations like the World Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club and things like that? They haven't been pressuring Governments and private industry enough, you mean?

RAZALI: Without singling anyone out, I think in the last five years there has been a sense of — if I can use the word — flabbiness of purpose, even with the NGOs. It's as if we hit the peak in 1992. We really hit the peak in 1992. We did very well. If you look at the document Agenda 21, I can assure you that you will not get such a document now or any time except in 1992. So it was a combination of various forces that brought about this wonderful point in time in 1992, the Rio Summit. We're not going to come to that again. There was a touch of romanticism about it also. Now comes reality: How do we deal with commitments we have all given collectively? And in translating that into reality, we have faulted, and in many cases we have failed.

MENON: You said that this is an occasion for the international community to flail itself, but if you look at the documentation, there is very little flailing. Actually, there's a good bit of self satisfied smirking. You take a look at the documentation, and there's no mention of globalization. I think it's mentioned once in this voluminous amount of paper that the UN has produced. There's no mention of arms, of the arms trade, of military spending, which are critical factors in sustainable development, and there's no mention of the information revolution. How can you say that this documentation of the special session is dealing with reality?

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, what does the information revolution have to do with the environment?

MENON: The environment — the information flows, who has it, who shares it, is critical to sustainable development.

RAZALI: And there is hardly any mention of deforestation.

MENON: Yes. Why is that?

RAZALI: Well, this is what I mean, this is why we should wear sackcloth in shame, for the things that we have not been able to do, and yet we congratulate ourselves, that we've had all these meetings after meetings after meetings, and tons of thousands of words from academia about sustainable development and all its concepts, and we have done nothing on the ground. Not nothing, but we've hardly done anything on the ground. We talk about empowerment. Where is empowerment now? I mean, we have national strategies, but have we really given the marginalized people, the people that are affected, the right to determine those decisions that we took on their behalf? I am not so sure.

PENKETH: Behind the scenes there's going to be some feverish negotiation during the summit on the final document, which is essentially going to review the progress and set new

targets, presumably, on the main issues. But there is total disagreement, it sounds, at this point, on this document. Is there anything that you can do or that you plan to do during the session to avoid the whole thing becoming a flop?

RAZALI: Well, I'm only the presiding officer, but of course I have responsibilities, and I'm certainly not going to be party to a document that doesn't serve any purpose, that again commits the sin of not wanting to come to grips with reality. So we really have work cut out ahead of us the next so many weeks. But obviously this was just — the document is not ready. It has to be looked at again. And the fact that there will be ministers present — I hope they will come early — will ensure that we will be able to look at the critical issues and make clear decisions. And on top of that we must try to raise the level of what would constitute a consensus. We must go away from this trench politics of North and South. There are overriding issues that must be examined closely together. And we must — unless we do that, we have failed.

PENKETH: But, for energy, for example, it's not a question of North and South, is it? You've got oil producers on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other.

RAZALI: Well, I don't think energy is purely a question of those producers of fossil fuels and those that would like to go a different way. I think it is possible to deal with this issue first in the context of energy efficiency. There are ways of conserving energy, and there are ways of using renewable sources of energy, and, at the same time, examining possibilities of non-renewable sources of energy. Surely we are not saying that fossil fuels are no longer to be used but we should only deal with renewable sources. I think it is possible to think in terms of sharing that area of —

MENON: But the point, the point here I think is, within the context of framing this document, you have a very strong lobby of oil-producing States which will not accept any language on global warming; and there is another group of States, the small island States, whose very life, their very existence is threatened by global warming, because if the sea level rises they'll all be submerged. Now, within the negotiating process for this conference, the energy producers have essentially stalemated the small island countries. So, where does this leave the —

RAZALI: I think the final pieces have not come together on this, on energy or on any other subject. But if on an issue as important as that there are contending parties that prevent something in the interests of the planet or in the interests of humankind to come out, then so be it, so it comes out that we have failed on energy, and all of us are responsible for this. I think not to be able to find a consensus shouldn't be a bad thing if it demonstrates a true fact, that things are wrong.

MENON: To what extent does this lack of scientific evidence of global warming, for instance, on this particular issue, affect negotiations? For instance, the most recent studies seem to indicate that global warming is a sort of circular phenomenon which is quite unrelated to whatever humanity does. To what extent does this kind of information weigh in the negotiating process?

RAZALI: I think — when I was speaking in Boston the other day to a university, I made this point to the scientific community: Make up your mind, make up your mind on the side of the welfare of the planet or the safety of humankind. I mean, scientists now mostly are charged by various groups to do this or to have a finding that's different from that. So in that context we really do not have a true commitment of scientists to say that things are wrong and that you have to do something about the climate that is warming up and affecting many islands in the seas. So, this is where scientists are losing, because they are doing experiments and research on behalf of certain vested interests.

PENKETH: Behind the specific issues, though, there also is a larger issue of financial and technology transfers, which go back to Rio when the Northern States promised the South that they would help them find environmentally clean ways of producing goods and services. So, I'm just wondering if you think that the developing countries, when they come to the summit, will still insist on blocking progress on the text, on this whole issue of financial transfers.

RAZALI: We spent the last five or six minutes just now talking about these difficulties. And I think we should go back to the first aspect; that is, we agreed in Rio in 1992 to common differentiated responsibilities. And what does this mean? It is still — it is as significant now as it was before; that is, the development concepts of the North of the last several decades are no longer applicable, because they're a big draw on finite resources and they pollute the world. But, at the same time, it is accepted that developing countries must be allowed to develop. But they should develop in the context of enhancing sustainable development, not pell-mell without any kind of context of what would happen to the environment or to the welfare of the planet. But development they must have. That constitutes common but differentiated responsibilities. Now, it is in the operationalizing of that set of responsibilities that all of us have faulted. The developed countries say, we must also continue with our development; we are not willing to make cutbacks on emissions; we will insist that the burden of change must be done from the South. And on the side of the South, the South is saying that we must have development, as it is their right, and development is part of the right to — it's part of human rights, as a matter of fact, but they refuse — some of us refuse to go beyond sustained economic growth. What we are saying is sequential: You must first have economic growth, then we have sustainability. This is not true. The concept of

sustainability applies to the South also, which means you have to factor in social and environmental factors.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ambassador Razali Ismail, President of the 51st session of the United Nations General Assembly.

MENON: Taking off from what you just said, if you look at the failure of Governments, perhaps the Governments that have the most difficulty to act are democracies. And the major industrial democracies of course dominate the world environmental scene as they do the world economic scene. And the reason it's difficult for them to act is that these people are elected for the short term as political leaders, and they must deliver a higher standard of living to their people, and that they can only do by revving up the existing economic machine. A major adjustment in terms in the interest of the environment would play havoc with their economies. How do you get past this basic conundrum, that the countries which are dominant economically and in environmental terms are the ones most — are least likely to take any firm action?

RAZALI: I think unless the problems of the environment or sustainable development are recognized as a global issue, we have very serious problems. I mean, we could make mistakes by not deciding where we are now, five years since Rio, and lead to serious ecological disasters. I mean, people could continue to be marginalized. If you allow poverty to be as they are, you could have very serious repercussions in various regions.

MENON: You know, the chairman of the preparatory committee for the special session, Dr. Tolba, Mostafa Tolba, was on this programme a while ago, and he said that Governments — on a scale of one to ten, he rated Governmental performance at three. Do you think that is likely to change?

RAZALI: I don't know what is the yardstick that's being applied by Dr. Tolba. But Governments have been lamentable in their performance. I don't know what the number, whether it's three or four or five. But there are Governments, I believe, who are committed to sustainable development.

MENON: Which ones?

RAZALI: You must — these are Governments who have the most number of marginalized people, or marginalized sectors of society. You must give them a chance to try to draw from the achievements of Rio, to have the benefit of that through ODA, through a transfer of benign technology, to be able to move themselves, these people out of this mire of poverty. This is — there certainly is a very clear signal that we should be doing that. At this moment, these Governments, these countries are being ignored or sidelined.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Razali, you talk about the achievements of Rio meaning the documents that were adopted, and you've spoken about more documents that may be

adopted at this special session, but all this is on paper, and it doesn't seem to have produced the results that were expected by humanity. And this background thing that I mentioned earlier, it says the number of people living in poverty has increased; gaps between rich and poor have grown, both within and between countries. So, I mean, all these documents are wonderful, but if they don't produce results, it's a waste of everybody's time.

RAZALI: I agree, I agree entirely. We must move from the documents and the speechifying to concrete actions. If I have my way, this conference should deal with concrete ideas, concrete action, programmes with set time-frames.

MENON: What do you think ordinary people out there who are perhaps watching this programme, what do you think an ordinary person can do to affect this? Is there anything that an individual can do?

RAZALI: I think the people that are seeing this programme should see that not everything is going right, should really educate; should remind Governments of the commitments that they have made in Rio, and insist that those commitments be honoured as global responsibilities.

PENKETH: The Rio commitments, of course they go back to 1992, and since then it seems that there are new crises that people are more aware of, for example, water shortage now, people say the next war could be over water. What are the major new issues for you that you think this special session should deal with?

RAZALI: Well, there are issues like water, oceans, energy, transport that have come to the fore, but these are not new issues as such, they have always been —

LITTLEJOHNS: Over-fishing, that's a big problem.

RAZALI: Over-fishing, yes. These are not new issues. And if there should be any "new issue", well, quote-unquote, I would say military spending — armaments, these are the issues that we should be looking at, too. I mean, you yourself said just now that there's no reference at all to military expenditure, the sales and production of highly sophisticated weapons. I mean, why are we not asking all these questions at this meeting? We should.

MENON: You also have a provision to involve what Rio called major groups, non-governmental groups. How are these groups being selected?

RAZALI: Well, I can assure you that my office, me and my assistant, we have worked very hard and agonized over each selection that we've had to make. And I feel — I have made the commitment to the delegates that they will be selected on the basis of relevance, balance, not just gender balance, but coming from North and South, and how effective they are and how important they are in the context of sustainability. And I'm happy to say that — of course, not everybody will agree on the selection — that we will have a very representative group of NGOs this time taking part.

MENON: Is the list final now, the representatives of the nine major groups?

RAZALI: Oh, yes, yes.

MENON: They are? So who's —

RAZALI: And all the invitations have gone out.

MENON: I see. Who's speaking for business?

RAZALI: Well, let's wait for all these things to come out. They have just gone into the post, as it were.

LITTLEJOHNS: General Motors! Ambassador Razali, in the introduction we mentioned the question of United Nations reform. I wonder if you'd like to raise that in discussion.

PENKETH: Well, it seems that this year could be make or break for UN reform generally, but as President of the General Assembly, you're particularly concerned with Security Council enlargement. Where does it stand now, particularly in the light of the African summit, which has just discussed the issue?

RAZALI: I have not seen the details of the African summit, what they have said about the Security Council reform. But I'm quite sure that any decision that is taken at the African summit will only move the process along. Or it will make clear where the African position would be, and that we have to contend with that position, and that we would have to move expeditiously to change the Council, to manifest a more legitimate arrangement of decision-making, and that change must mean increase or expansion in both permanent and non-permanent membership, including a better arrangement on decision-making and on the working methods and transparency of the Council.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Razali, you know the American saying, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I mean, the Security Council has been doing a pretty decent job for the last couple of years, I mean —

MENON: Well, speak for yourself, Michael.

RAZALI: You're not serious, are you?

LITTLEJOHNS: I am serious, yes.

RAZALI: Well, I'm sorry, I totally disagree with you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, I mean, compared with the time, with the cold war period, when it was more or less hamstrung by vetoes, apart from one or two vetoes there have been very few vetoes since the end of the cold war. And there's a great collegiality in the Security Council which didn't exist before. So why are you saying that the Security Council needs to be changed?

RAZALI: There are some friends of mine from the developing countries who are not talking about collegiality, they're talking about duress and coercion. Have you heard them

saying these things to you? And just because it's not broken — I mean, what is it — what is being broken? This is something invented by the victorious Powers in 1945, to keep the Security Council —

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, the United Nations was invented by the victorious Powers.

RAZALI: Yes. Since then many things have changed. There have been qualitative changes in the world, and the permanent five have to wake up and recognize this.

MENON: One of the — really, the factors, the fact that has to be faced is that, whatever we say here, we are speaking at a level which very few people can understand outside the UN, and whether it's Security Council reform or the environment, there has to be some way of allowing individuals out there to gear themselves into what's happening up here. And this I find one of the real problems of trying to explain the UN as a journalist, because so much of what happens is unrelated to what ordinary people face in their lives. What do you think the solution is?

RAZALI: At the beginning of my presidency last September, I said this, the UN must deal with real needs in the real world. I believe in this fervently, passionately. And it is a pity that we are not able to do this in this year or in all the years before. We must somehow be able to do this.

MENON: But what do you think — for instance, I've asked senior officials of the UN, you know, what can an individual do to help the UN in its fight for global environment. There's never a clear answer, because they haven't thought it through, they haven't said, okay, well, you can write to so and so, you can get so much information, you can do this and this, they haven't thought that through. That basic link does not exist. And if you adopt yet another massive document at this special session and it says nothing to the ordinary people, how can you explain it to them? What relevance is it?

RAZALI: Well, if we are not able to adopt a document that means directly to the people on the ground, then we have failed, actually. And we can congratulate ourselves, we have got a document — but that document is not worth very much. But as far as people and the UN are concerned, people have a romantic version of what the UN is. We must realize that the UN is conditioned by certain circumstances; it is not in many ways allowed to be more than what it is supposed to be. And that's a fact of life. Our political realities dictate the shape and scope of what UN activities would be. I mean, if only the UN is given more room, more space, more resources, then we can go a long way further. But how do you place the UN in the context of WTO, for example? How do you talk about —

MENON: The World Trade Organization.

RAZALI: — ecology, environment when the World Trade Organization is dealing with aspects of trade that impinge directly or ignore environmental concerns and agreements?

How do you deal with this? I am trying to — I have invited, what is it, the chief of WTO, Mr. Ruggiero, to come here. I haven't gotten a reply to say he's not coming.

MENON: But shouldn't one of the actions then be that you set up a monitoring mechanism for the World Trade Organization? Since it — well, the World Trade Organization is even more esoteric than what the UN does.

RAZALI: It's absolutely esoteric. It is elitist, it is exclusive, it is not democratic. Not everybody can join. Yes, there must be a way, but — there must be a way to link up what is happening in the World Trade Organization with what's happening here. The CSD of the UN, if we get a good result on —

LITTLEJOHNS: CSD? What's that?

RAZALI: The Commission on Sustainable Development — that is supposed to be the body that deals with the issues of development and environment — must be one this time that will be able to link up and influence the manner of decision-making in the World Trade Organization. And elsewhere. In the World Bank, for example. This is what we have to do. The UN must come out of its straitjacket and confines. It depends on the Governments, it depends on the Secretary-General, it depends on what kind of results we have at conferences like this.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Razali, we have only a few seconds left. We referred to the reform question, specifically the Security Council, in which you are very active. Do you think that there's going to be agreement on reforming the Security Council during your presidency?

RAZALI: It doesn't matter whether there is agreement during my presidency. What matters is there should be reform, because the Security Council must be reformed. As it is, it is not democratic, it is not representative, and it doesn't serve the bigger purpose of extending the legitimacy of the UN on issues of peace and security.

LITTLEJOHNS: But adding Germany and Japan as permanent members is not going to increase the democratic character of the Security Council.

RAZALI: Yes, once you — it is not a question of adding Germany and Japan; it is adding Germany and Japan, if they are selected, plus three others from the developing regions, plus changes in decision-making, and more transparency.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Razali, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ambassador Razali Ismail, President of the 51st session of the United Nations General Assembly. He was interviewed by Anne Penketh of AFP and Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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